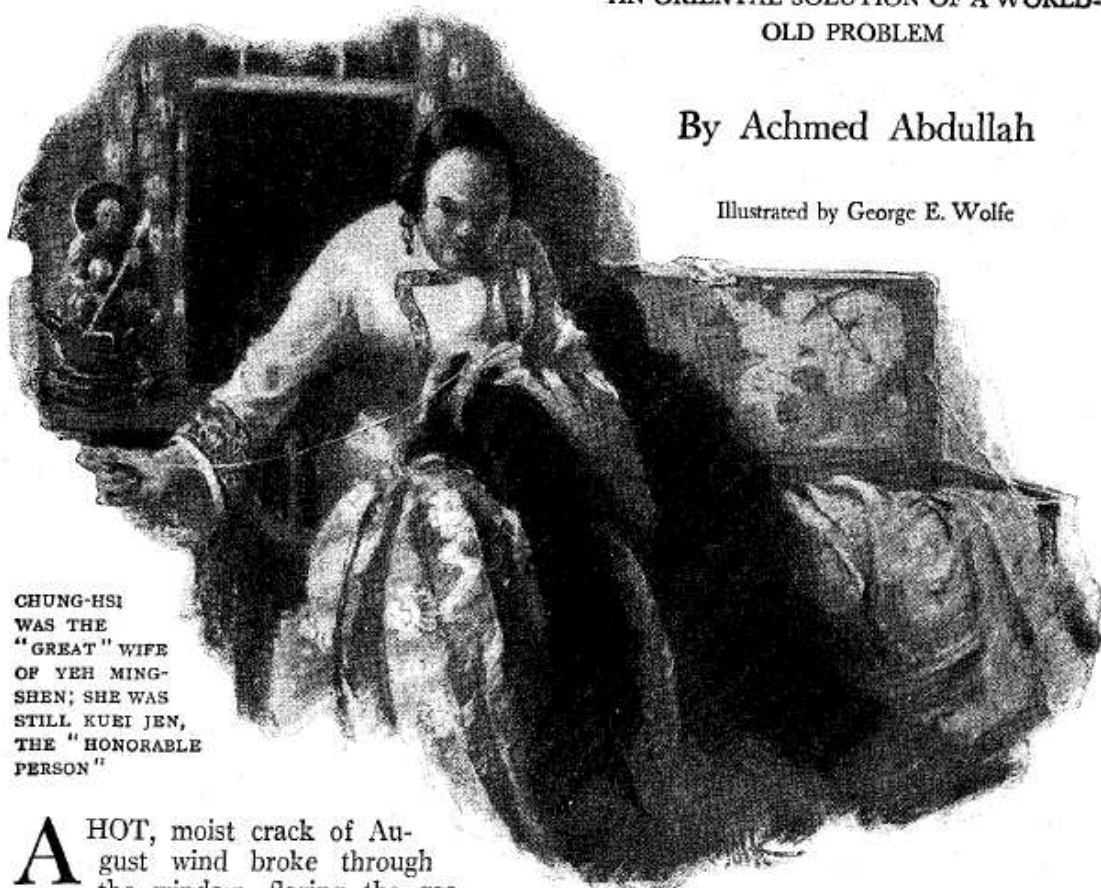


# The Yellow Wife

AN ORIENTAL SOLUTION OF A WORLD-  
OLD PROBLEM

By Achmed Abdullah

Illustrated by George E. Wolfe



CHUNG-HSI  
WAS THE  
"GREAT" WIFE  
OF YEH MING-  
SHEN; SHE WAS  
STILL KUEI JEN,  
THE "HONORABLE  
PERSON"

A HOT, moist crack of August wind broke through the window, flaring the gas-jet to a forked, yellow flicker, painting bloated, malicious shadows on ceiling and walls and furniture, clattering the unfastened shutters without, and fluttering the plum-blue silk under Chung-hsi's nimble fingers — the plum-blue robe of state embroidered with moonbeams, scarlet butterflies, and chrome-yellow roses, which be-

longed to Fanny, the daughter of Nag Hong Fah, proprietor of the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace, and the second wife of Chung-hsi's husband, Yeh Ming-shen, the wealthy wholesale tea-merchant.

Fanny would wear the robe to-morrow, over a fourteen-and-a-half-dollar tailor-made serge bought on Grand Street, and

topped by a home-made, sleazy, three-dollar straw-and-maline toque, when the little son she had borne her lord and master four months earlier would be christened in the Baptist Mission Chapel around the corner on Mott Street, with Miss Edith Rutter, the social-settlement investigator, acting as god-mother, and Chung-hsi herself as dry-nurse.

For the latter's marriage, performed in Los Angeles nineteen years back, had been Chinese, from the shooting of giant fire-crackers to the tossing of the quilt, from the proper obeisances in front of the ancestral tablets to the priest fumigating the bride's finery over a charcoal brazier and chanting the ceremonious words:

"A thousand eyes, ten thousand eyes, I sift out; gold and silver, pearls and diamonds, wealth and precious things, I sift in!"

Complete the wedding had been, in every detail and ancient ritual, but Chinese; while Fanny's marriage to Yeh Ming-shen had been Christian, American—and, by the same token, legal.

All this was unknown to Miss Edith Rutter, who, for nearly three decades, had been groping at the elusive fringes of the Mongol soul; unknown to Bill Devoy, the detective, whose honest Irish feet had become almost furtive walking the padded slime of the Chinatown beat; unknown to all the whites of the neighborhood. They knew Chung-hsi only as the respectable and elderly tea-merchant's respectable and elderly housekeeper.

## II

BUT all the yellow boys knew.

They knew that Chung-hsi was the "great" wife of Yeh Ming-shen; that she was still *kuei jen*, the "honorable person," though it was Fanny who was entered on the marriage register as Mrs. Ming-shen. Moreover, they were all familiar with the reason, and approved of it, on moral as well as on sociological grounds.

For Chung-hsi had borne no man child to her husband, not even a daughter; and it was proper that he should have married again.

"It is your duty," had said Yu Ch'ang, the priest of the joss temple, acting as official spokesman for the Azure Dragon Trading Company, of which Ming-shen was president. "You are the most respectable burgess in Pell Street. You are a shining example for our younger men; and there is

nothing quite so unfilial as to have no children."

"It is your duty," had said Nag Hong Fah, the restaurant proprietor, quoting a rude Cantonese river proverb. "For if you have no children, you will have no one to burn sacred paper for you at the Feast of Universal Rescue."

"It is your duty," had said Nag Hop Fat, the soothsayer. "For you need a son to pacify the little devils who follow when your dead body will be buried in its charming retreat, while your soul will be leaping the Dragon Gate."

"It is your duty," had said Quiong Mah, his mother-in-law. "For a man without a son is like a finely dressed person walking in the dark, like a learned man without nobility of character, like a cloud without rain."

"It is your duty," had said Yung Long, the wholesale grocer, when Yeh Ming-shen, who loved Chung-hsi with a slow, passive sort of love, had tried to rebel against the Pell Street dictum—epitome of the Chinese creed that the individual is a negligible nothing, while the family, including its unborn children and its dead and buried progenitors, is an unbreakable entity. "Love itself is a shadow. Love, without the fruit of children, is a flattened flower, a breath of wind flitting into the dark, an infidel act, a stinking, spent candle, a diamond fallen into a refuse-heap."

"A diamond fallen into a refuse-heap is none the less precious," Yeh Ming-shen had argued.

"But you will muddy your hand to your wrist fishing it out, wise and older brother!" had come the grocer's reply. "Love without children is an indecency and a blasphemy, especially condemned by Tzeng Tzu, the great philosopher. Love without children is like the aim of the archer who misses a hairbreadth at the bow—and a mile at the butt."

"Fate!" Yeh Ming-shen had remonstrated rather weakly. "It is not the fault of the spring-time that the leafless tree does not bring forth leaves. It is not the fault of the sun that the owl cannot see by daylight. It is not the fault of the cloud that the rain does not drop into the mouth of the cuckoo. Who can interfere with what fate has written on the foreheads of all of us?"

Yung Long had smiled.

"Fate?" he had echoed ironically.

"When I see you, strong and rich and well-fleshed and not yet fifty; when I look down Pell Street and behold the little buds of plum and lotus that grow and giggle on every painted balcony—then I say that there is no fate as long as a man has his loins and a woman soft lips. Take another wife unto yourself, wise and older brother!"

"A lack of harmonious subjection spills the tea!" Yeh Ming-shen had quoted. "The little buds of plum and lotus you speak of are foreign-born, American-born. Their ideas are curiously independent and immoral. Their perception of what love is is abominable. Such a little bud will not be satisfied with being the pearl-wife. She will want to be the gold-wife. She will demand that I divorce Chung-hsi—whom I love."

"There are still some buds brought up in the good ways, the old ways, the ways of our fathers."

"Perhaps; but who? I spend my life between my office and my home. I know nothing of buds. Who will act as go-between?"

"There is decency and orthodox fastidiousness in such matters, wise and older brother. Ask your wife. It is both her right and her duty to choose the mother of your children. Also, having lived in close intimacy with you for many years, she will know what type of woman is best for your honorable happiness."

### III

WHEN finally, overwhelmed by the massive surge of Pell Street public opinion, Yeh Ming-shen had given in and had told Chung-hsi that he would take a second wife—that he would "sip vinegar," as he had expressed it—she, too, had said that it was his duty.

"I myself shall pick her out," she had added. "A stout, full-breasted, wide-hipped woman. A girl who will bear men children to you."

"And to you, old woman!" Yeh Ming-shen had rejoined.

"To both of us. My withered heart craves for the feel of soft, warm, selfish, helpless little baby hands. I shall love your second wife for the sake of the children she will bear."

And that night, while Chung-hsi was paying observantly ceremonious visits to several Chinese women of her acquaintance who had marriageable daughters, Yeh Ming-

shen, speaking to the priest over the spiced cups of the liquor-store which belonged to the Chin Sor Company, and was known as the Place of Sweet Desire and Heavenly Entertainment, had said that a good wife condensed in her soul the wisdom of the three faiths of China—the faith of Buddha, the faith of Confucius, and the faith of Tao.

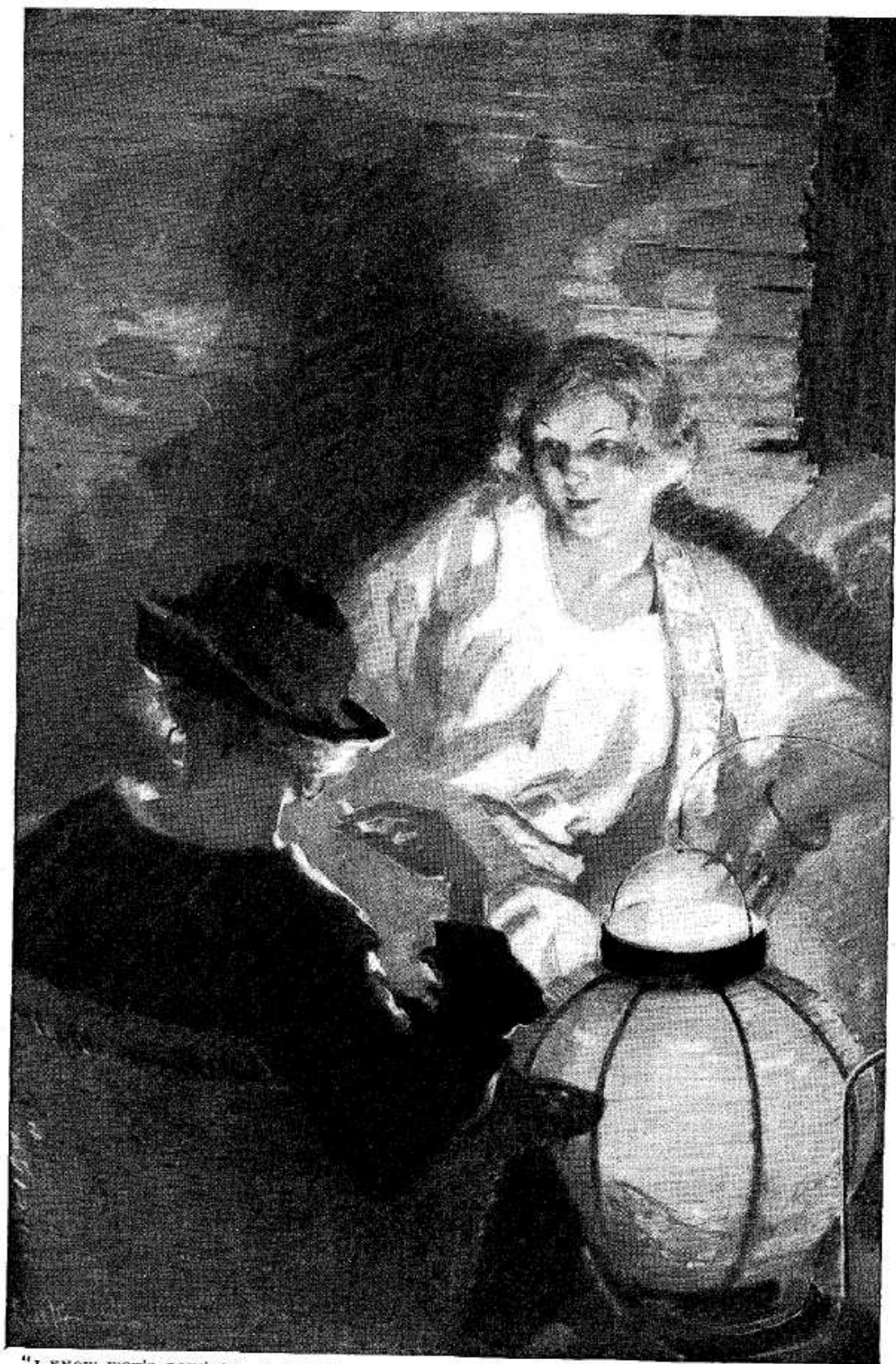
"For," he had added, "such a woman's heart holds the essence of the three great sages' teachings: *li*, which is the ultimate law of right action; *chu*, which is the golden rule of tolerance and equity; and *chuntz*, which is good morals."

"Pooh!" had sneered the priest, whose domestic bickerings were a byword in Pell Street. "The titmouse held up its feet so that the sky might not fall upon it and crush it; and the tailless ox attempted to push away the elephant with the strength of its back. Both tried the impossible—as does the fool who prates of the soul of woman. Consider her body, and only her body. Kiss her, or beat her, but do not think about her. Do not thresh straw. Do not paint a picture on running water."

Yeh Ming-shen had smiled, serene in his and Chung-hsi's mutual affection, and after a careful survey, a great deal of close bargaining, and questions asked with that mixture of sudden, brutal directness and flowery, archaic ceremonialism which means good breeding to the Mongol, she had found a second wife for her husband—Fanny, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Nag Hong Fah, who, in spite of the white blood inherited from her mother, had been trained in the Chinese manner.

Fanny had submitted without much argument.

"Betcha sweet life!" she had said to Gwendolyn Wah Yat, her chum, like herself a half-caste with golden hair and slanting eyes, and like herself familiar since early youth with the smug reek, the tame conveniences, the hot, secret passions of the Pell Street world. "I know wot's goin' on. I can hear the fleas cough. But—Gawd!—all men are alike, ain't they? Sure. Po-ly-gam-wotyecallit?" She had learned the word and its meaning in Miss Edith Rutter's sociological classes. "They're all po-ly-gams, white and yeller and polka-dotted—sure Mike! But them Chinks is decent about it, y'understand. They owns up to it like little men—among themselves, that is. They don't do it just out o' beast wickedness as them Bowery toughs do, and



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give the goil the doity end o' the stick. And then I'm sorta fond of Yeh. He's nice and solid and—oh, smooth, like some piece of Chineese silk, see? And his old goil ain't so bad—and, say, she's a swell cook. You oughta taste the way she fixes up duck cooked sweet and sour! Take it from me, kid, this three-in-one is goin' to pan out all right, all right!"

And it had, from the very first, thought Chung-hsi, as she bent over her work.

Of course, Fanny was young, and had the sweeping sublimity and selfishness of youth. She had done little of the household work; she had run off to the motion-picture theater around the corner on the Bowery, night after night; she had occasionally caused Chung-hsi to lose face by a thoughtless word; she had a vague and sketchy way of washing and dressing—alien to Chung-hsi's meticulous Chinese soul—and a strong perfume followed her wherever she went.

Moreover, at times Chung-hsi had been jealous.

But—had she?

Jealous of that frothy, tinkly, golden-haired little half-caste?

She threaded her needle with twisted gold, looked up, out, into the rushing, wailing silence of the night, punctured by the gliding of slipped feet, an eery Cantonese song, staccato stammering, a soft clash of crockery from the Great Shanghai Chop Suey Palace across the way, where Pell Street plays follow-the-leader with the Bowery, the singsong of a Chinese voice speaking in English with passionate laboriousness:

"Sure I'll be good to you—damn good—Malie—"

"You better, old yeller-face! You better, you old Chinky sweetmeat!"

A smacking kiss and a policeman's obscene laughter; and Chung-hsi smiled.

Jealous of—that?

Voices and laughter slurred into the thick, reeking night. The wind collapsed, beaten by the heat. The padded, slipped feet shuffled away mysteriously, nastily. The silence clogged, choked.

Then, again, clanking, jarring, shrieking, maniacal, the night noises—the Elevated shooting past in its screaming, brassy modernity; a beer-bottle smashing against the pavement; the asthmatic hiss of a pop-corn wagon; a curse—once more voices.

"I'm clazy about you, Malie."

"All right, yeller-face! We'll make it a go, sure."

"Clazy—clazy—"

Again the wind broke, again collapsed. The gas-jet straightened, jerked sidewise, flickered, blue, gold-tipped, and Chung-hsi sighed. She felt the heat like a stabbing pain. It seemed to her that Pell Street, the whole earth, had shrunk to a mote of star-dust madly whirling in the moon's immense white dazzle.

But she must finish her work. She had promised Yeh Ming-shen.

"For the sake of the little son whom Fanny has borne—to both of us!" he had said, gently patting her smooth, raven tresses.

To both of them!

Fanny had been in the room at the time, and Chung-hsi remembered the crooked, elusive little smile on her face.

#### IV

SHE returned to her work.

Steadily she embroidered the bottom and shoulders of the robe, threading with gold among the moonbeams and scarlet butterflies and chrome-yellow roses words in Mandarin ideographs, copied from the "Book of Ceremonies and Outer Observances" lent her by Yu Ch'ang, the priest—words which would proclaim, amid the cold, alien pomp of the foreigners' church, the Chinese qualifications of the young mother.

*Tun* she embroidered, and *tuan*; *kung* and *ch'un*, *lung* *yu* and *fu* and *sung* and *chen* and *yi*—meaning that Fanny, for all the rebel white blood in her veins, was generous and orthodox, respectful and liberal-minded, blessed and prosperous, reverential, sedate, and harmonious.

*Kang tu*—not jealous—embroidered Chung-hsi, and her hand dropped. Dropped her head.

Not jealous!

Why, there was no reason why Fanny should be jealous. Fanny, who was wrapped in the golden, silken sheen of her arrogant youth! Fanny, who had borne a man child to her husband!

But she herself—the "great" wife—the old, worn-out wife who cooked and scrubbed and—

She looked out into the hot, violet night with eyes that were less those of an individual than those of a race, an old race. And there is perhaps no more costly and

terrible privilege in the world than to belong to an old race. It means the memory of too many pains, too many disillusion—like the church she could see from the roof of her house, gray with years and seamed with sufferings.

She was not a Western woman, given to dissecting her emotions and screwing them into test-tubes. She seldom permitted her thoughts to wanton with her fancy. All violent emotions, of love as well as of hate, of joy as well as of sorrow, were repugnant to her—almost physically repugnant. Pity, for herself and for others, was alien to her clear, concise Chinese soul. Such pity she had always dismissed contemptuously, impatiently, as an outgrowth not of good-heartedness but of shrinking, maudlin cowardice.

She had come into the world, as all things come, for an immutable purpose. Hers had been to propagate the honorable name of her husband; and in this she had failed.

Not that she blamed herself for the failure. But, since she had given Yeh Ming-shen no son of her own body to worship him, after his death, with *hiao*, or filial submission, it made it so much more incumbent upon her to look after his earthly happiness. Happiness meant tranquil serenity, and she knew that, as breath stains a mirror and rust a sword, thus anger stains the delicate crystal of the soul, and that there is no anger more corrosive than the anger of the flesh called jealousy.

She did not wish, did not mean, to be jealous; but, meaning to or not, the primitive emotion had been stronger than her ancient racial philosophy, chiefly during those first weeks when it had become known that Fanny would be a mother.

In those days her husband had surrounded his second wife with extra care, extra tenderness. He had brought her a vase of splendid Kiang Hi blue, at which she had sniffed; a quilted silk robe embroidered with black bats—the symbol of happiness—over a shimmering, confused blending of pearly rose, lambent saffron-yellow, and delicate nacreous blue, which, an hour later, in Carlos Garcia's second-hand shop on the Bowery, Fanny had swapped for a ball-gown of arrogant, meretricious scarlet glittering with silver spangles; slippers of pale rose and apple-green, which, to Chung-hsi's slightly malicious but unvoiced amusement, had been too small for her. Finally—acting on the

suggestion of Chung-hsi, who had been trying to atone for her gentle malice at the episode of the slippers—he had bought for Fanny a set of white-fox furs which she had folded rapturously to her young bosom. Also, he had spoken to Fanny, softly and at length, in his careful, slightly clipped English, which she preferred to Chinese, and of which Chung-hsi understood little more than a smattering.

But though the English words had been strange to the latter, their meaning had been clear; and then flickers of sudden rage had darted through her calm, bland philosophy, causing her to pray to her painted gods for the eternal and intransmutable *tao*, the changeless principle without labor, without desire, without emotions—without the seething, black passions of the flesh, or the passions, as seething, as black, of the twisting, imagining, lying mind.

## V

HER husband had seen, had understood, had tried to explain.

"One looks carefully after the new field that is yellow with the glint of kerning corn," he had said. "One looks carefully after the woman about to bear a child."

Then, when Chung-hsi, afraid of losing face, had not replied, he had continued:

"Old woman, an elephant is not afraid of fishes, and it has also been said that if a mouse be as big as a bullock, yet it would be the slave of the cat. You are the wife of my youth, my great wife, my gold wife. The other, the little bud—"

"You love—her?" she had asked, the turmoil in her heart making her breathless.

"No," he had replied very calmly, drawing a tiny fan from his sleeve and clicking open the fretted ivory sticks.

"But—she loves *you*!"

He had inclined his head, without the slightest vanity, without the slightest complacency.

He knew, as all Pell Street knew, that from the first day of their marriage Fanny had loved him with that overpowering, unreasoning passion which once in a while—perhaps to give the lie to the cut-and-dried romantic standards—a young girl brings to a much older man. But, being a Chinaman, thus accepting facts as facts and not as a basis for shifting, harrying speculations, he was innocent of what—again to his purely Oriental mind—seemed the de-

structive philosophy of the Occident, a mixture of emphasizing trivialities, of cloaking hypocrisy with the mantle of modesty, and obscenity with that of piety.

Moreover, he was without either physical or mental curiosity, and, therefore, the fact that he was loved by the woman whom he had married solely for the sake of propagating his family was as important to him as the fact that the Cantonese lilies which he grew on his balcony, in a square, dragon-painted porcelain pot of glaucous green, were white, gold-flecked, and richly scented.

It was pleasant, but without real consequence. It was a sending of fate, to be accepted as such, to be enjoyed in decent moderation; but hardly to be given thanks for.

He had said so to Chung-hsi; and she had sighed, not altogether convinced.

"She"—this had been after Fanny had given birth to her child—"she is the mother of your son!"

"No more than you! For no goal is gained by simple abandonment to action. No child is created by the simple gesture of the body. He who lives by action and gesture alone weaves the boat of his life with withered leaves. The heart and mind, too, help to conceive. And my mind—nearly twenty years have we been married!—is suffused with the flame of yours—and my heart, old woman, touches your feet."

"You kiss her!"

"Yes. And there is the child, her child, my child, your child. With every kiss I gave her was the memory of your lips, old woman!"

"You speak to her of love!" she had argued.

"Of course I do, just as I sprinkle the flowers on my balcony; but I only speak to her of love in the language of the white devils—the foreigners—"

"Oh—yes!"

## VI

AND, suddenly, the fact that her husband never spoke to Fanny of love in Chinese, had seemed all-convincing, all-important, to Chung-hsi. For just as in every terrible memory there is always one moment, often a trivial moment, more poignantly lasting than the rest, thus in every important crisis in a man's or a woman's life it is some negligible detail—negligible only when considered by itself—which at times seems to hold the crux of the matter. It had been

so with Chung-hsi, with the groping self-questionings, the perplexities, the mazed, subtle intricacies of her dilemma.

Now she had found the answer. Her husband talked to Fanny of love. Yes—but only in English! That did not matter. There was no meaning, no inner heart, in such words—foreign words—crude, silly, barbarous words—like the hiccupy barking of dogs.

She smiled and bent to her work, embroidering the final word—*kang tu*, not jealous—with steady fingers.

Outside the night rushed. A wind came up from the Hudson and walked across the roofs on slow feet. Pell Street streamed into the east like a fretted, grotesque smudge. The spires of the Baptist Mission Chapel soared up like eager lances. From the joss temple, a short distance away, came the pungent scent of Hung Shu incense-sticks, and the priest's high-pitched words—doubtless for the benefit and the clinking dimes of some goggle-eyed, rubberneck-wagon tourists:

*"Strive for meditation, for the purification of the heart, making the mind one-pointed, and reducing to rest the action of the thinking principle as well as of the senses and organs—"*

Clear the blessed Lord Buddha's words drifted through the motley, patched symphony of the Pell Street night, and again Chung-hsi smiled.

"Reducing to rest the senses and the organs," she echoed.

Why, she thought, such was her *tao*, her eternal, changeless principle of happiness—reducing to rest the senses and the organs—without labor, without desires, without regret—

She looked at her dollar watch, her one and only surrender to American modernity. It was nearly midnight. Her husband and Fanny and their little son had gone to a Chinese celebration in honor of the child. Soon they would be home, and Yeh Ming-shen would ask for tea and preserves and his pipe.

She folded up the plum robe of ceremony, put it in a camphor-wood chest, and walked to the kitchen. There she prepared the porcelain samovar and returned to the front room and arranged the opium layout—the pot-bellied jar with its treacly, acrid contents, the small silver lamp, brushes, needles, and brass rod. From a black-velvet case she took a smoke-browned bamboo



"I SHALL TAKE THE CHILD. YOU ARE TIRED. GO TO BED. SLEEP. TO-MORROW MORNING  
IS THE CHRISTENING"



pipe with ivory mouthpiece and scarlet, silken tassels.

A few seconds later she heard a brushing of feet on the door-mat in the hall below, coming up the stairs; a child's fretting, sleepy gurgle—voices.

Momentarily something clutched at her heart-strings. Momentarily jealousy touched her soul, like a clay-cold hand. But she smiled serenely, as the voices came nearer, speaking in English:

"Sure I love you, Fanny."

"Gee, I'm glad, Yeh! You know I'm just plumb nutty about you—you old snoozle-ookums!"

"Yes. And I am—how you say?—yes—nutty about *you*!" And, as the door to Fanny's room across the hall opened with a creaking of hinges: "I shall take the child. You are tired. Go to bed. Sleep. Tomorrow morning early is the christening."

"Good night, jump o' sweetness!"

"Good night, little Fanny!"

Chung-hsi looked up. Her husband stood on the threshold, holding in his arms a little bundle of silk and linen.

"Look, old woman!" he said, carefully baring the head of the infant. "See the creamy skin, the hooded brow, the high cheek-bones, the long-lobed ears! Our child, old woman! Yours and mine!"

"Yours and mine!" echoed Chung-hsi.

And she added, after a little pause:

"And Fanny's?"

Yeh Ming-shen smiled. He shook his head.

"Oh—" he began; then was silent.

"And Fanny's?" she insisted. "Is not the child Fanny's, too?"

Again he did not know what to reply. Somehow, Chung-hsi's voice made him feel

nervous, apprehensive. He seemed to fancy it as an ancient voice of China itself, time itself, echoing down immense corridors of carved, fretted stone, from the depths of vast temples, from the very heart of the black-haired race.

He shook himself together.

"Why," he said, "Fanny is only the instrument—the instrument which we needed, you and I, to bear us this little child."

She looked at him steadily, stonily.

"Only the—*instrument*?" she repeated.

"Yes, old woman. And the instrument has—"

"Done its duty? Served its turn?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" she breathed gently, and left the room.

Came silence.

## VII

AND, a few minutes later, from the direction of Fanny's bedchamber, there rose a high shriek—a shriek that changed, ludicrously, into a choked gurgle.

Again silence; and even as Yeh Ming-shen, the child clutched tightly against his breast, leaped to the door, it opened, and Chung-hsi came in, in her right hand a dagger crimson with blood.

"The instrument has done its duty," she said calmly. "The instrument has served its turn. I have broken the instrument."

Erect she stood, formidable, absolutely in control of the situation, while Yeh Ming-shen shivered, frantically searching his brain how he might be able to dispose of Fanny's lifeless body, how to explain her disappearance when neighbors and the white man's ridiculous law began to ask questions.